

## What 'engagement' with Iran and North Korea means

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*Ever since they settled into the Situation Room and began to plot strategies for their first encounters with North Korea and Iran, President Obama's aides have described the two countries as polar opposites, unified only by a common desire for nuclear weapons.*

Now the two countries are about to become two radically different experiments in how "engagement" works or fails to work, as the new president takes a dramatically more confrontational approach with Pyongyang on the high seas, and tries to navigate the tricky politics of exploiting the anger on the streets of Tehran.

President Bush famously lumped North Korea and Iran together as two-thirds of the Axis of Evil, a post-9/11 sound bite that obfuscated, in the minds of many, the very different challenges they pose.

After examining what went wrong in the Bush years, when North Korea harvested most of the plutonium for its small arsenal, and Iran sped ahead to build the capability to make its own nuclear fuel, Mr. Obama and his aides are now designing different strategies for the two countries that are based on radically different assessments of their motivations.

In the Obama analysis, the North is receding into what the president's top strategists have repeatedly called a "defensive crouch," trying to stave off the world with a barrage of missile and nuclear tests while the country's leadership tries to sort out a survival strategy. Constantly on the brink of starvation, its military so broke that it cannot train its pilots, it has no illusions about becoming a great power in Asia. Its main goal is survival — and exploiting the money-making opportunities that come from arms exports.

In contrast, Iran looked to the Obama team as a far more dynamic, open society eager to restore its traditional role as one of the great powers — if not the greatest — in the Middle East. To the country's leadership, and to many of the reformers as well, the nuclear program is all about bolstering its chances at restoration. Unlike North Korea, Iran may not need a fully tested nuclear weapon. It just needs to create the perception that, with a few twists of the screwdriver, it is capable of turning a peaceful nuclear infrastructure into a weapons program, in a matter of months. The perception may be as powerful as the bomb.

"Nuclear weapons capability would surely add to Iran's ability to twist arms in the region," Dennis Ross, the administration's chief Iran strategist, wrote with David Makovsky in their new book about the Middle East, "Myths, Illusions, and Peace," published just as Iranians went to the polls last week in the now-disputed election. The book, completed before Mr. Ross was hired by the administration, is causing considerable heartburn in the White House, because it lays out a step-by-step recipe for what the authors call the "hybrid option" — combining diplomatic initiatives with excruciating economic pressure on the most vulnerable elements of Iran's oil sector, whose output is declining.

But re-analyzing the problem is easier than designing workable strategies to reverse what may now be irreversible. American presidents have been certain they could contain North Korea, or perhaps speed its collapse, since the armistice that ended the Korean War in 1953. That was the same year that the C.I.A. organized a coup that deposed Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq and installed the Shah — a cold war operation for which Mr. Obama just publicly apologized during his speech at Cairo University last month. Very little has broken Washington's way in either country in the ensuing 56 years.

So is there any reason to believe that Mr. Obama's new approaches will change the dynamic with either country? Maybe, but there are huge risks ahead.

The decision to confront North Korea with overwhelming pressure — designed to bring its shipping and financial transactions to a virtual standstill — is based on the conclusion that re-entering negotiations to buy the dismantlement of the country's main nuclear facility at Yongbyon is a futile strategy. It has already failed twice, once for President Clinton, once for President Bush. When Robert M. Gates, the defense secretary, said "I'm tired of buying the same horse twice," he was signaling that the administration would not offer fuel, food or security guarantees in return for incremental steps to take apart the reactors and plutonium reprocessing facilities inside the high walls at Yongbyon.

It may not be a problem; North Korea says it is never coming back to the talks. Maybe it will, maybe it won't. But until then, Mr. Obama's "engagement" strategy is more about overwhelming pressure than diplomacy.

By hailing and seeking to inspect suspect North Korean ships in the Sea of Japan, and then pressing nations around the world to pick apart the ship's cargo once they pull into ports for refueling, Mr. Obama is seeking to bring to a grinding halt the last revenue-producing element of the North Korean economy. The risk is that, however carefully designed to avoid open confrontation, the North Koreans will lash out — perhaps opening fire on American, Japanese or South Korean ships, creating an incident that could quickly escalate.

"Right now, our biggest worry is the North Korean captain who does something very, very stupid," a senior military officer in the Pacific Command said Monday. "And when you intercept ships and tell them to stop, the risk is that someone can't control their adrenaline. Then we can find ourselves back in the old days."

In Iran, in contrast, the administration's approach is likely to be far more about diplomacy in the next few months than about pressure.

Mr. Obama's aides are clearly seeking to stand back and watch while protestors take to the streets shouting slogans against the country's ruling elite. The White House fears that if the president speaks too supportively of the protestors, it will give President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad the chance he is looking for to portray the angry crowds as American stooges. After all, in Iran it does not take much to stoke memories of the Mossadeq fiasco.

It is too early to know whether these protests, which no one predicted, will gain steam or, like the uprising 20 years ago this month in Tiananmen Square, simply burn out. Mr. Obama's conundrum is that he does not have the luxury of time. International nuclear inspectors describe a nuclear program that is speeding up — moving the country very close to the nuclear capability that the United States, Israel and Iran's Arab neighbors say they cannot abide.

Yet if the new administration moves too quickly in executing the strategy of "engagement with pressure" — what Mr. Ross and Mr. Makovsky describe in their book as showing the mullahs that "Iran's economic lifeline is going to be cut and the oil revenues are going to dry up" — it could quickly turn those young Iranians in the streets against Washington. And as one of Mr. Obama's strategists put it the other day, hearing those protestors shout down the clerics "sounds a lot better to my ears than 'Death to America!'"

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